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ABSTRACT

This report examines issues concerning the provision of accommodations for students with disabilities participating in state and district assessments. The report considers what an accommodation is, what kinds of accommodations are available, who should make the decision regarding accommodations, when accommodations should be used, and how accommodations affect test results. Analysis of state written guidelines has resulted in identification of the following principles to guide decisions: (1) base decisions on the student's needs; (2) use a form identifying variables in accommodation decisions; (3) have people who know the student make decisions about accommodations; (4) align instruction, classroom testing, and district or state assessment; and (5) consider the type of test. States are urged to have a written assessment policy which reflects inclusive practices for student participation in assessment and clear assessment accommodation policies. Two tables list types of assessment accommodations and sample questions to consider in the decision process. (DB)

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Providing Assessment Accommodations

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For Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments

Background

Teaching diverse student populations continues to top the list of challenges faced by educators. To address these challenges, our nation is undertaking numerous educational reforms. However, students with disabilities have often been left out of such educational reforms, in part because they have been excluded from assessments used for accountability purposes.

There are a variety of reasons for exclusion from assessments, one of which is the failure to provide necessary assessment accommodations to students who need them. Participation of students with disabilities in state assessments is required under the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and providing assessment accommodations is one aspect of ensuring participation.

Some of the questions that need to be answered to facilitate providing appropriate accommodations are:

- What is an assessment accommodation?
- What kinds of accommodations are available?
- Who makes the decision about needed accommodations?
- When should accommodations be used?
- How do accommodations affect the results of tests?
- What principles should guide accommodation decisions?

What Is An Assessment Accommodation?

An assessment accommodation is an alteration in the way a test is administered. Accommodations can be categorized into at least six types: setting, presentation, timing, response, scheduling, and other. The "other" category catches any accommodations that a student may need that do not fit neatly into the other five areas.

An assessment accommodation is provided because of a student need, not to give a student an advantage. When students with disabilities use assessment accommodations, it is to show what they know without being impeded by their disabilities. For example, Jody is a student with cerebral palsy who is working toward the same instructional goals or standards as other students in her classroom. To participate in the assessment, she needs a scribe to write her responses and extended time to

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complete the test. By providing these response and timing accommodations, Jody and other students who previously would have been excluded from assessments are provided the means to participate.

Assessment accommodations are provided for students with disabilities receiving special education services and students on 504 plans. However, not all special education or 504 students will need assessment accommodations. In some states, assessment accommodations are provided to any student for whom a need is demonstrated.

What Kinds of Accommodations Are Available?

There is no set of universally approved assessment accommodations. But most people agree that accommodations can be organized into the six categories of setting, presentation, timing, response, scheduling, and other. An abbreviated list of some possible accommodations within each of these categories is presented in Table 1.

Accommodation policies vary tremendously. It is not uncommon to find an accommodation that is allowed in one state yet prohibited in another. Part of the reason for this variability is the lack of a good

Table 1. Types of Assessment Accommodations

Setting	Presentation
• Administer the test to a small group in a separate location • Administer the test individually in a separate location • Provide special lighting • Provide adaptive or special furniture • Provide special acoustics • Administer the test in a location with minimal distractions • Administer the test in a small group, study carrel, or individually	• Provide on audio tape • Increase spacing between items or reduce items per page or line • Increase size of answer bubbles • Provide reading passages with one complete sentence per line • Highlight key words or phrases in directions • Provide cues (e.g., arrows and stop signs) on answer form • Secure papers to work area with tape/magnets
Timing	**Response**
• Allow a flexible schedule • Extend the time allotted to complete the test • Allow frequent breaks during testing • Provide frequent breaks on one subtest but not another	• Allow marking of answers in booklet • Tape record responses for later verbatim translation • Allow use of scribe • Provide copying assistance between drafts
Scheduling	**Other**
• Administer the test in several sessions, specifying the duration of each session • Administer the test over several days, specifying the duration for each day's session • Allow subtests to be taken in a different order • Administer the test in the afternoon rather than in the morning, or vice versa	• Special test preparation • On-task/focusing prompts • Any accommodation that a student needs that does not fit under the existing categories

Note: *This table is adapted from Thurlow, Elliott, and Ysseldyke (1997, in press). Reprinted with permission from Corwin Press.*

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research base for identifying appropriate accommodations.

Decisions about assessment accommodations should be based on what students need in order to be provided with an equal opportunity to show what they know without impediment of their disabilities. It is important that accommodations do not compromise what the test is measuring. This underscores the importance of making sure decision makers know the purpose of an assessment and the skills or constructs it is trying to measure.

Who Makes the Decision?

Most decisions about who needs assessment accommodations should be made by people who know the educational needs of the student — in most cases, the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) team. This is consistent with the IDEA requirement that the IEP identify accommodations needed in order for the student to participate in an assessment.

Decision makers need to have a complete understanding of the assessment, its purpose, and the skills being measured when deciding who needs accommodations. These factors, together with the student's needs, determine the appropriateness of specific assessment accommodations.

The IEP team also will have to make decisions about the kinds of accommodations that a student needs. For example, should a student be permitted to use a calculator during an assessment? Should the student memorize the formulas, or should these be provided? If a test is measuring the use of formulas to solve problems, then the team may decide that allowing a student to use a calculator, if one is needed, is appropriate. If this same test is measuring a student's ability to apply formulas to derive answers, the team might decide that supplying these formulas would also be appropriate. If however, the test is measuring a student's ability to recall formulas and apply them to calculate correct answers through a step by step process, then the team might decide that neither accommodation is appropriate.

When Should Accommodations be Used?

Accommodations should be provided for the assessment when they are routinely provided during classroom instruction. In other words, when classroom accommodations are made so that learning is not impeded by a student's disability, such accommodations generally should be provided during assessment.

The most controversial accommodation decisions involve reading tests to students and writing down student responses. When a reading test is measuring reading decoding, providing a reader compromises what the test is measuring. However, if the purpose of the test is to measure ability to gain understanding or interpret written language, the use of a reader would be appropriate. Similarly, if a student is unable to record complete thoughts in writing due to a disability such as dysgraphia, but is able to verbally express thoughts well, then a tape recorder could be used and later transcribed for scoring purposes, or a scribe might be provided at the time of the test. Not all parts of a test, even within a single content area, necessarily measure the same skill. Hence, it is important to know the purpose of the test and its parts, what is being measured, and what accommodation would be appropriate. No accommodation should be provided to the student for the first time on the day of the test or to provide an unfair advantage.

How Do Accommodations Affect the Results of Tests?

There has been much discussion about the impact assessment accommodations have on test results. Although this remains a valid concern, there is little empirical information available that directly addresses this concern.

Several federally-funded research efforts are currently underway to investigate the impact of accommodations on test validity and reliability. Until we know more about the impact of assessment accommodations on test results, students with disabilities should be provided needed accommodations. The only alternative to this is to exclude students who need accommodations. In doing so, school districts and states are left with no data on these students. It is better to include and accommodate and look for ways to report test scores than to exclude students

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(see NCEO Policy Directions 8, *Reporting Educational Results for Students with Disabilities*).

Principles to Guide Decisions About Accommodations

Current state accommodation policies range from one line to 70 pages in length. They also vary tremendously in the extent to which they maximize the participation of students with disabilities in assessments. Yet, there are some common principles that underlie accommodation policies that maximize participation of students with disabilities in accountability systems.

▶ Base decisions on the student's needs.
Decisions about instructional accommodations must be made with the student's needs in mind. It is important that the provision of assessment accommodations is in no way based on the setting in which a student receives services, the type of disability a student has, or the number of classes the student attends in the general education curriculum. The focus must be kept on what, if any, instructional and assessment accommodations the student needs to have an equal footing with students who do not have a disability. The key question to ask is, "How are these accommodations directly linked to the student's learning needs?"

▶ Use a form indicating variables to consider in making accommodation decisions, and document the need for accommodations.
A form indicating variables to consider in making accommodation recommendations will help decision makers consider the most relevant variables (e.g., how the student's disability is likely to interfere with performance) rather than irrelevant considerations (e.g., what program the student is in, how well the student is likely to perform). The form used to make decisions should be attached to the student's IEP to provide official documentation about accommodations for instruction, classroom tests, and state or district assessments. Questions that might be used to develop a form for making accommodation recommendations are provided in Table 2.

▶ Have people who know the student make the decisions about accommodations.
Accommodation decisions should be made by people who know the needs of the student. Typically these are teachers, parents, or guardians; most states use IEP teams to make accommodation decisions. People who know the student are able to consider the impact of the student's disability on educational performance within the context of instruction, classroom tests, and district assessments. In addition to being part of the decision process, parents must be made aware of the need for assessment accommodations and any impact of their use in their child's testing program.

▶ Be sure there is alignment between what happens during instruction, classroom testing, and district or state assessment.
The first time a student receives an accommodation should not be on the day of a test or assessment. A needed accommodation is one that is provided throughout the teach-test instructional cycle. Therefore, there should be a natural flow between what occurs in instruction and what is occurring during assessment. In some cases accommodations provided during instruction may not be appropriate for a classroom test or for a state or district assessment situation. For example, providing guided practice and prompts to assist a student in deriving an answer may be appropriate for instruction but not during assessments.

▶ Consider the type of test.
Some states use norm-referenced tests (NRT) and some use criterion-referenced tests (CRT). Other states use both. Norm-referenced tests are used to allow comparisons to norms developed under standardized procedures; criterion-referenced tests assess whether students can do particular tasks, but do not compare a student's performance with the performance of a standardization group. While CRTs allow for greater flexibility in providing accommodations, NRTs allow their use as well. Before disallowing accommodations for NRTs, consider what the test is measuring and whether the needed accommodation compromises the results. The reporting of assessment results can be structured to encompass the use of accommodations on both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments.

Recommendations

Debate about assessment accommodations is under way at state and school district levels. There is disagreement about their use, with some saying "we have never done it this way before" and others saying "it is unfair to those students who don't get to use them." Administrators, teachers, parents, and assessment personnel need to develop a policy for providing assessment accommodations to students who need them, and to ensure that educators know the legal implications of their decisions.

The use of assessment accommodations is really about ensuring that students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know without being impeded by their disabilities. It is recommended that, at the very minimum, written assessment policy reflect inclusive practices for student participation in assessment, and that clear assessment accommodation policies relate both to participation and reporting of assessment results.

Resources

Assessment Guidelines that Maximize the Participation of Students with Disabilities in Large-Scale Assessments: Characteristics and Considerations (Synthesis Report 25). Elliott, J., Thurlow, M., & Ysseldyke, J. (1996). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Table 2. Sample Questions to Consider in Making Accommodation Decisions

Setting	Presentation
• Can the student focus on his or her own work with 25 to 30 other students in a quiet setting? • Does the student display behaviors that are distracting to other students? • Can the student take the test in the same way as it is administered to other students?	• Can the student listen and follow oral directions given by an adult or an audio tape? • Can the student see and hear? • Can the student read?
Timing	**Response**
• Can the student work continuously for the entire length of a typically administered portion of the test (e.g., 20 to 30 minutes)? • Does the student use accommodations that require more time to complete individual test items?	• Can the student track from a test booklet to a test response form? • Is the student able to manipulate a pencil or other writing instrument?
Scheduling	**Other**
• Does the student take a medication that dissipates over time, so that optimal performance might occur at a certain time of day? • Does the student's anxiety level increase dramatically when working in certain content areas, so that these should be administered after all other content areas are assessed?	• Is this the first time that the student will be taking a district or state assessment? • Does the student have the necessary test-taking skills?

Note: *This table is adapted from Thurlow, Elliott, and Ysseldyke (1997, in press). Reprinted with permission from Corwin Press.*

Reporting Educational Results for Students with Disabilities (NCEO Policy Directions 8). Erickson, R., Ysseldyke, J., Thurlow, M., and Elliott, J. (1997). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Testing Students with Disabilities: Practical Strategies for Complying with District and State Requirements. Thurlow, M., Elliott, J., & Ysseldyke, J. (1997, in press). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. (Due out in Oct.)

Alternate Assessments for Students with Disabilities Unable to Participate in General Large-Scale Assessments (NCEO Policy Directions 5). Thurlow, M., Olsen, K., Elliott, J., Ysseldyke, J., Erickson, R., & Ahearn, E. (1996). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

A Compilation of States' Guidelines for Accommodations in Assessments for Students with Disabilities (Synthesis Report 18). Thurlow, M., Scott, D., & Ysseldyke, J. (1995). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Increasing the Participation of Students with Disabilities in State and District Assessments (NCEO Policy Directions 6). Thurlow, M., Ysseldyke, J., Erickson, R., & Elliott, J. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes. ▲

About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in the identification of outcomes and indicators to monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities. NCEO addresses the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and graduation requirements.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE).

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NCEO *Policy Directions* is a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Judy Elliott, Martha Thurlow, Jim Ysseldyke, and Ron Erickson, with input from many individuals.

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